

'Nixon Is Talking the War Just Like Johnson Used to Talk'

LEAVING the White House after a somber 100-minute talk with President Nixon last week, one Republican senator turned to another and remarked that Mr. Nixon "is talking about the war just like Johnson used to talk."

What triggered this comparison between Mr. Nixon and former President Johnson, who was driven out of office by the war in Vietnam, was partly President Nixon's apparent confidence that Hanoi would soon have to enter serious negotiations to end the war (a conviction of Mr. Johnson's that was never satisfied).

The other explanation for the senator's remark comparing the two presidents was Mr. Nixon's flat assertion during the long session over coffee in the oval office that he would never sacrifice the nation's long-range interest by "bugging out" no matter how far he went down in the polls—even if he dropped all the way (he said with a wry smile) "to 5 per cent."

That, too, sounded to the dozen Republican senators on the evening of Sept. 30 just like the Lyndon Johnson of two years ago, six months before he astonished the nation with his no-second-term announcement.

Even more interesting to some of those present, however, was something else Mr. Nixon said. Asked by Sen. Edward J. Gurney of Florida why the United States did not apply enough military power "to win the war," Mr. Nixon replied that the military option was still open.

He emphasized that the last thing he wanted to do was to exercise that option, but said the option had to be kept alive until the North Vietnamese entered serious negotiations.

At that, another of the Republicans present asked what the President meant by the "military option"—a renewal of the bombing of the North, including such targets as the docks in Haiphong harbor, or did he mean a military invasion of North Vietnam?

In his response, Mr. Nixon hedged, but acknowledged that the military "option" might include all that.

Whereupon, another of the Republicans said he hoped there wouldn't be any public speculation from the administration on re-Americanizing the war. The Re-



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publicans, he said, were already in a political bind over the war, and talk about military re-escalation would only make it worse. Mr. Nixon replied that he understood that point.

LATER, two of the Republicans who heard Mr. Nixon that evening told us that they were deeply disturbed. One said flatly: "He scared the hell out of me."

In hard fact, however, it is unlikely that President Nixon would suddenly change the whole direction of his careful strategy to de-Americanize—or Vietnamize—the war. In the first place, it is too early to know how fast that process, which has been national policy for only six months, can move—how fast U.S. troops can be withdrawn and replaced by Saigon's troops.

But more important, the President knows that any switch to military escalation by the U.S. would cripple his administration before the end of its first year and wreck his own party.

Accordingly, the Johnson-style talk from Mr. Nixon last week seems to have been mainly a psychological

ploy directed both at Hanoi and at restive Republicans in Congress now publicly breaking away from the Nixon leadership on the war.

Mr. Nixon has been around long enough to know that no conversation with as many as a dozen or more senators can stay private for long, particularly when its important aspect is a revelation of the presidential mood and not any hard, classified information.

Thus, to Hanoi, by this reasoning, Mr. Nixon was conveying a calculated message of his growing impatience in a way that would carry more conviction than a public statement, and that would not expose him to the political criticism of a public statement.

And to restive Republican politicians, Mr. Nixon was in effect warning that if they do not support his Vietnamization plan, and show Hanoi a united front at least of Republicans, the result may be far worse.

If this is an accurate appraisal of what the President was trying to accomplish on Sept. 30, it shows clearly how tenuous his bargaining position with both Hanoi and his own party here at home has become. Like Mr. Johnson before him, he may be finding it impossible to pacify both South Vietnam and his own country at the same time.

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